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ABSTRACT

The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) must take steps to ensure that proposals for reform in literacy education are based on the best research, theory, and practice of teaching as well as on the perceived needs of the public and press. NCTE members can take steps to advise legislators and school board members of some of the "Actions for Excellence in English," which are relatively inexpensive and which reflect current knowledge of teaching and learning in English, including the following: (1) create fellowship programs for teachers in service to allow them to retrain and reeducate themselves in new methods of literacy teaching; (2) establish commissions of experienced English teachers and concerned community members to investigate local needs in literacy education and to make recommendations for the schools; (3) take advantage of institutes and workshops that offer excellent low-cost professional development; (4) channel funds away from the adoption of expensive back-to-basics textbooks toward the purchase of quality books, magazines, newspapers, and similar materials of literacy; (5) promote programs in "reading and writing across the curriculum" so that literacy is the focus of every classroom; (6) reduce class size; and (7) publicize programs that do an excellent job of teaching English. NCTE can provide extensive resources for members helping legislators and school boards improve English programs. (HTH)

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November 20, 1983
Stephen N. Tchudi, Michigan State University
Comments on taking office as President, National Council of Teachers of English
NCTE Annual Convention, Denver, Colorado

Actions for Excellence in English

Stephen Tchudi

The flood of reports examining the state of the nation's educational system must leave the responsible English teacher puzzled. Schools are variously reported to be decaying, improving, in need of higher standards, in need of different standards, insufficiently funded, extravagantly funded, a national disgrace, and the nation's pride and joy. It is even difficult for educators to keep up with the myriad programs and mandates being proposed by local and state school boards and legislatures to remedy the perceived deficiencies in American education. Some of the proposals for change--for example, those intended to identify and reward excellent teachers--seem to have been carefully designed by people who are genuinely informed about problems in the schools. Other plans--for instance, those focusing primarily on competency testing and those concerned more with the length of the school day than with its substance--appear to be little more than venting of public frustration. But the proposals--good, bad, and otherwise--are "in the hopper," and it is apparent that within the next few months mandates and legislation will be passed that will shape American education for decades to come.

It seems imperative to me that actions for reform in literacy education reflect the knowledge and skills of NCTE

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members. As an organization whose constitution is dedicated to improvement of instruction in English, NCTE needs to take steps, as a national organization, as state affiliates, and as individual members, to ensure that proposals for change are based on the best research, theory, and practice of teaching as well as the perceived needs of the public and the press. Legislators and school board members should make decisions about changes in the educational system only after hearing from the skilled, informed, and experienced professionals who make up the National Council of Teachers of English.

Many of our recommendations can be far less expensive and more effective than the costly quick-cure solutions being proposed nation wide. For example, the most frequently proposed solution to the country's educational problems is massive testing programs, which are extraordinarily expensive. (My own state legislature is discussing an expenditure of $420 million for teacher and student competency testing in a time when school districts are going bankrupt and English teachers are facing larger classes and smaller book budgets.) I propose that NCTE-ers take steps to advise legislators and school board members of some of the following alternatives, ACTIONS FOR EXCELLENCE IN ENGLISH. These programs are relatively inexpensive, and they reflect current knowledge of teaching and learning in English. (In each case, the plans and programs of NCTE at the national level are enclosed in parentheses.)

State and local schools can:

--create fellowship programs for teachers in service to allow them to retrain and reeducate themselves in new methods of literacy teaching. (The NCTE is providing a model for such programs by exploring a national fellowship program for English teachers.)

--establish commissions of experienced English teachers and concerned community members to investigate local needs in literacy education and to make recommendations for the schools. (NCTE has established a national task force on Excellence in English which will provide guidance for such groups. Further, the document, "The Essentials of English," available from the Council, offers ideas "for discussion and dialogue.")

--take advantage of institutes and workshops which offer excellent, low cost professional development. (NCTE has launched a summer workshop program with a meeting of department heads in Urbana this past summer; the program will be expanded to four English teaching workshops in 1984. In addition, NCTE's new cosponsored seminar program is creating new small to mid-sized meetings and workshops on specialized topics all across the country.)

--provide funds for professionals to attend local, state, and national conferences. (NCTE and its affiliates offer hundreds of meetings and conferences each year, dozens within reasonable driving distance of every Council member.)

--provide and support opportunities for professional English teachers on the job. (NCTE is preparing a leaflet

suggesting steps school leaders can take to enhance professionalism among staff members.)

--reduce class size. (NCTE has campaigned on this issue for decades. Now is the time for school boards to heed our recommendations.)

--restore support for school libraries to establish excellent resources in the materials of literacy.

--channel funds away from the adoption of expensive back-to-basics textbooks toward the purchase of quality books, magazines, newspapers, and similar materials of literacy.

--promote programs in "reading and writing across the curriculum" so that literacy is a focus in every classroom, not just in the classes of English/language arts teachers.

--sponsor teacher exchanges that encourage the sharing of effective teaching techniques.

--provide funds for local development of curriculum to meet local needs.

--create teacher resource centers with up-to-date libraries of professional books, new teaching materials, audio-visual aids and resources.

--publicize programs which do an excellent job of teaching English.

The National Council of Teachers of English can provide extensive resources for members helping legislators and school boards improve English programs. Council members have access to publications, conferences, position statements and guidelines,

model curricula, sample teaching materials, research findings, and professional bibliographies. Members can also call on national experts through the Council, and they can draw on the services of its volunteer and professional leaders. The National Council of Teachers of English is committed to providing guidance and support, not only for its members, but for any group or organization sincerely dedicated to taking actions for excellence in English.